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'National Security' Leak Clampdown Apparently Widens

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While the White House yesterday sought to assure reporters that its new clampdown on "national security" information was not meant "to stop the free flow of information," a new directive turned up at the Agriculture Department requesting all senior officials there to clear all interviews with "major media" with the White House in advance.

The directive was signed on Jan. 8 by John Ochs, assistant to Agriculture Secretary John R. Block, and is addressed to undersecretaries, assistant secretaries, top staff and administrators of the department.

"As we enter the new year," the directive says, "it is important to the president that all of us help him convey his message to the public as effectively as possible."

"Specifically," the memo says, "it is requested that whenever you or anyone under your jurisdiction receives an invitation for an interview on a Sunday talk show, morning network television, Nightline, McNeil-Lehrer or other major press appearance (including print interviews) that you consult with me so that I may clear it with the White House prior to your acceptance."

At the White House earlier in the day spokesmen Larry Speakes and David Gergen said that Cabinet members had been told to clear their appearances on television interview programs, but that this was not a new policy and that it was "a coordination process and not a clearance process."

The Agriculture directive, however, appears to go beyond that, extending to officials well below Cabinet rank and including "print," or newspaper, interviews as well as television appearances.

The sudden interest in controls on media access to government officials stems from the announcement Tuesday evening by the White House of tough new directives aimed at limiting reporters' access to officials who have "national security" information and threatening such officials with investigation by "all legal methods" if information they have is leaked to the press.

The Agriculture Department has little to do with national security, and does not mention it in its directive, which could indicate that the White House has sent word to some or all other agencies of government to restrict access to the media generally. It was not possible to clarify this yesterday.

Block and Ochs were both out of the country, and a spokesman in Agriculture said he wasn't sure precisely how the directive was initiated but that he thought it might have originated when the top officials sensed the president's concern over leaks at a recent Cabinet meeting.

Spokesmen from other departments such as Labor and Treasury said that to the best of their knowledge their agencies had not received any directives from the White House, though Treasury is involved to a small extent in the national security measures that have been made public.